

## ***Big, Hopeful Loops***

by Juliet Johnson

### Hopeful Loops, 1

I met him in a café, in the back room, where there was an artist's opening, wine and cheese, free drinks and meats. He was there because it was raining. I was there because I was hungry, and broke.

The wheel of cheese looked disheveled by the time I got to it. It was no longer round, or even any shape at all. White, but beaten up. It looked like the neighborhood where I grew up. Or maybe not the neighborhood, but how I felt in the neighborhood where I grew up. Beaten up and ignored.

I saw his finger first. His finger touching the white linen tablecloth. The rain was hitting the window outside in the alley behind the café, where the ambulances screamed by on their way through the shortcut to the hospital. Someone was always on the verge of dying, sirens screaming, white and red ambulance shooting past the windows of the café, facing the brick wall of the opposite building.

His finger rested on the tablecloth like it had just made a long journey. It was his index finger, the pointer one, an Indian chief awaiting its squaw. A grape rolled off the tray of cheese, and his finger curled around it. I looked up his arm. He was talking to someone else, an artist maybe, someone with a beret. The grape was cradled in his finger. He hadn't even looked at it. He had just known it was coming, and caught it without looking. I watched it go to his plate. His mouth moved. His glasses thick with meaning. He must be a genius, I thought. Looking like that. Catching a grape without looking. Talking to an artist, in the rain, on a Thursday.

I loaded up my circle paper plate, which was thicker than my sweater, lots of orange fruit, melon, crackers, flat foods, gooey foods, coarse red wine, hot as blood. I took a sip, slipping past him, looking out over the top of my paper cup, but still he had not looked at me. I noticed the finger, on the grape. He was fiddling with it. Stroking its soft green head.

I slid into a booth least populated by artist sycophants. There were two at the end of the booth, but they were both gasping over the painting nearest them. I hadn't even looked at the art.

I thought about his finger, lazy on a newspaper on a Sunday morning. I thought about his hand on my head, like the green grape. I thought about his fist curled around a pen, writing in sloping handwriting his death notices. I thought about his finger on a trigger. I thought about a gun pointed at his wife. I thought about her scream. I thought about his relieved, drooling laugh.

When I looked up he was looking at me. Sort of the way you'd look at a mime with no money in his hat. He looked drained, like the woman with the beret, who was leaving to talk to someone else, had unplugged all his energy. He looked like he knew what I was thinking.

As he moved nearer, the women at the end of my booth left, and I started to dread his footsteps. Oh no, I thought. Conversation. But he set his plate down and then walked away, someplace else. His footsteps then sounded like little bursts of sobs. I turned.

His finger was next to me again. There, on the red tablecloth. Tapping. I stared at the nail. He had faked me out.

"This seat taken?"

I looked up, hollow eyed. He had a regular face, like the kind on a cereal box. Someone you could trust hitchhiking, unless it was past two a.m., when you can't trust anyone. I wondered what he looked like past two a.m.

I mumbled, moving over. I looked at his deserted plate at the end of the table. He reached across and got it.

"What do you think of it?" He motioned vaguely.

"What?"

"The art."

"I don't know." I didn't feel like sounding smart, or making something up. I looked up at the painting nearest me, but it just looked like wallpaper. "I can't tell."

"You can't tell what it is, or you can't tell what you feel?"

He picked up his grape and put it between his lips. I suddenly felt his tongue on my face. His teeth on my eyelid. He was eating me.

I was blank. Watching his teeth.

"What?" He said.

I couldn't speak.

"That's too big a question I think, for a Thursday."

He laughed. "You can't tell things on Thursdays?"

"I'm pretty sure things don't get understood until at least Friday or Saturday. Thursdays are for hunting and gathering." I felt my amusing glands emptying of their power. I wished my plate was empty so I could get more food. I needed an activity. I shoved some cheese mixed with fruit into my mouth. I didn't normally like to mix my food. But there wasn't time to organize.

I thought he was looking at me, so I tried to look peaceful chewing. When I looked up he was looking out the window at the rain. A silent ambulance passed, its red lights flashing the emergency without the sound. We both watched the quiet red.

"Maybe that was a deaf person," I said, spitting cheese.

He looked at me, oddly.

I imitated the flashing siren in a gesture. "No sound..."

He nodded, suddenly, getting it.

"Oh, do you have deaf relatives or something? Maybe that's offensive."

"Finish chewing," he said.

I swallowed my crackers whole. It scratched all the way down. "Oh, sorry. Is that offensive?"

"No, I just can't understand you."

We were silent. I was instantly regretting my whole persona. Why had I let him talk to the real me? The one who ate and drank with other people was way more entertaining. He was getting the dregs of a Thursday night when nothing particularly mind-shattering had happened to me. I hadn't overheard a great story that I could retell, embellished, as my own. I hadn't formulated some clever scam for bilking money out of people. I hadn't participated in any group consciousness. It was over, it was all bad, bad, like my clothes, and my food choices, and where I lived, and my relationships ...

"You're married," I said, wiping my mouth on my napkin. Indicating the ring. The ring was only two fingers away from The Finger, the one who had led to this whole conversation. I wondered how the Ring Finger felt about the Index Finger. I thought the Index Finger was ultimately more attractive. The leader. The flexible leader.

He glanced at his ring finger. I noticed the index finger shake a bit. My heart melted at the shake.

"I like pathetic shaking in a person. I like when people are weak. It turns me on." I drank a whole lot of wine after that one. He was looking at me, but not stunned, more perplexed. I drained my cup. "Whew, that's over. Want some wine? I'm getting some more." I stood up. "I haven't eaten all day."

"Maybe I should get it." He started to get up. I let him get the wine. Maybe it'd make him feel more like a man, if picking up two paper cups and pouring wine from a plastic jug could make you feel like a man. I always thought women were the serving ones, but whatever. He returned pretty quickly. Sat back down. I noticed, when he handed me back my cup, which went straight to my mouth, that he brought his finger back with him.

I drank a long swallow. Then I handed him a pen.

"What's your handwriting look like?"

He sat a moment, then slowly looked through his pockets, picking out an envelope, flattening it and turning it over. He took the pen cap off. He held the pen poised. His lovely index finger was helping out all along. What a trooper.

"What should I write?" He asked. "I mean, I realize we aren't going to have a conversation on any realistic kind of level."

"That's a relief." I glanced around the room. Virtue was written on the wall. "What's virtue. The artist's name?"

He pointed at virtue. The tall woman with the beret.

"Which virtue is she?"

"I think maybe it's Chastity. Her artwork is certainly chaste."

"Chastity isn't a virtue. Charity is, though." I shoveled some more cheese into my mouth.

"Gluttony is ranking high up there," he said pointedly.

"I haven't even gotten started. Did you see that cheese wheel?" I realized I had no chance with this man, so I was pulling out all the stops now.

"Maybe you're hungry for something else."

I thought maybe if he put his hand on my hair I'd stop all the chatter. But his hand was firmly on the pen. He wrote "Chastity" down on the envelope. Then he wrote Sonny Bono. Cher. I admired that. At least he knew where Chastity came from. "Are there any other virtues that are the children of famous people?"

He squeezed up his eyebrows, as if thinking hard about that one.

"I think people shy away from the virtues because they're so hard to live up to," I concluded. "Not that you see many sins running around. No kids named Wrath. Or Greed."

"Greed O'Malley. I like that. It's to the point."

We had a real camaraderie going now. I felt like we had been in camp for years, each summer looking forward to seeing each other again. Our little table was our encampment, and nobody would disturb us.

Two ladies sat immediately at the end of the booth. Shattering my illusion.

He saw my distress at their appearance.

"Infiltrators," I whispered.

He spoke slowly to me, as if sensing that I could barely hear him from way out in his world. "Do you want to go somewhere for coffee?"

I looked at him weirdly. Motioned at the cheese plate and the wine in front of us.

He spoke again. "This isn't coffee."

"It's free. They have coffee over there. I haven't gotten to it yet." I pointed at it.

He looked.

"Actually I don't even drink coffee. If you said, 'wanna go somewhere for a cinnamon roll', or 'wanna go shopping for a new DVD player' I might consider it."

He doodled on the paper, looking up at me with confusion. I liked that look. It was a look I was familiar with. I slid down in the booth until my hair was piled on the shelf behind me, and my chin was to my chest.

"I'm not good at talking to anyone." I said finally. "I'm much better at watching."

He stopped doodling. He stuck his big fat hand out, the finger waving at me happily. The Finger.

"I'm Frank," he said, frankly.

"All the good ones are named Frank," I mumbled. Eyeing his hand. "Where's that been?"

"Everywhere."

I looked at my hands. "Mine too. I'm almost ashamed of the places I've put these."

"Let's take them somewhere else."

He was crushing up his trash. I focused on his hands. They were strong as little tractors. I felt my face curling up at the edges from the humidity, and fear.

"Okay," I nodded.

## Hopeful Loops, 2

On the trolley, I studied the envelope. I had his handwriting on the envelope. His letters connected and yet they didn't, really. His G's had big loops in them. Big hopeful loops. I felt his leg beside me on the trolley. I could feel his heat through his thin pants. I looked at my feet lifted and passing the rolling concrete of the road. I could only look from my knees down. I saw my bare legs, my feet in sandals and the rolling concrete. The concrete had a curb, and other people's feet on it. Lots of grass growing up through the cracks. Some trash. Mostly blank grey. Moving.

"I never take the trolley," he said, from somewhere above, and to the side. He was talking through my hair. His voice was sifting in through my hair covering my ear, and the air, and I liked that. His voice was going right inside my body.

I tilted my head a little bit. His profile was looking out at the street, higher than me, at the tops of buildings and the sky. One big claw was holding on to the trolley railing. He looked down suddenly and I felt like vaulting off the moving trolley. His look was too close. He smiled, perplexed. "It's so unnecessary," he said promptly.

I didn't know what we were talking about. The trolley, the hands, the movement of the wooden machine, the benches, the man in a uniform standing at the steering wheel even though the thing was on tracks and wasn't going anywhere not already pre-destined, dingling the bell...

I looked back at his handwriting. The small a's looked squashed. Trampled on.

"I once got this hand in a pretty bad accident. For about four months I had to write with my left hand, and I am not a lefty." He put his hand into my vision, showing me, a big flat white pancake hand.

"Maybe you shouldn't play favorites," I said.

"What?" The dingy bell had drowned me out.

I looked up at him, the giant mountain, precariously.

"Maybe if you didn't play favorites your left would write better for you."

"My left would right better?"

"You know. Write. Not right."

"You think I'm wrong?"

"Write."

It was a glamorous day. I imagined the city when it had horse carts pulling vegetables around. When kids carried guns to go hunting. I imagined the weather felt the same then. Then motor cars came, and women's skirts got short, and the whole world got sidetracked in looking for a better deal.

"I like the trolley because you have to hold on," I said finally.

He reached down and held onto my hand. A hot little planet catapulting into my atmosphere.

We got licorice at the corner store. Some little black kids were on the stoop fighting over a can of Coke. We started walking down a big hill.

"Did you know the artist?" I said.

He shook his head. Held his hand out, as if looking for rain.

"Is it going to rain again?" I asked.

He studied me carefully. "I don't know."

### Hopeful Loops, 3

In the park we stopped at the birdbath, that was filled with water from the deluge. The park looked abandoned quickly by children and nannies, some toys strewn around, the empty playground equipment mewling mournfully the loss of the clambering, sweating children.

The birdbath was a circle of peeling paint and leaves, full to the top of fresh water. Frank felt the water with a finger. He moved one leaf. His finger surfed on the surface.

I touched the leaf floating near the edge. My sweater started to hang in the water. He pulled it back.

He put his other fingers on the surface, just on the top, not pushing into the water.

I laid my palm flat on the water, feeling the floating feeling, the top layer.

I watched some drips drop onto my shoestraps. I saw some bird footprints on the ground where wet birds had hopped away after showering.

Halfway across the park, still walking, he looped his arm through mine. I looked up at the sky and it seemed to gasp a huge, relieved cloud-filled gasp. Finally, it said.

#### Hopeful Loops, 4

The next time I saw Frank we were on the bus.

"I don't think we can get married right away," I said, on the bus.

"Why not?" He asked, just as soberly.

"I don't like the way you treat your r's." I showed him the much-mutilated envelope. "It's like they're ignored or something. You just pass right over them."

"Some things you have to pass over in order to get to the good stuff," he advised. I hated when he adopted that teacher mode.

"You can't pass over letters," I admonished him. "They form everything."

He was studying the map. "You know if you stay on the bus long enough it loops right back to where you started," he pointed at us, on the blue line.

"I'm just glad we're on the blue line," I whispered, suddenly afraid. "The red line is certain death."

A man beside Frank got up for his stop, abandoning his seat. Frank ushered me into the open space. The seat was still hot from the other guy's butt. I wondered what the guy had been thinking about that made his butt so hot. I suddenly didn't want some other guy's butt heat on my butt. I looked up at Frank worriedly but he was smiling out the window at the brick buildings. His absent smile looked like an Oxford student crossing the wet green grass on a crisp fall day in England. It had a nice sweater in it, and perhaps a purple cotton scarf. I might've relaxed, if that had been something I was able to do.

A few stops later he sat next to me.

His finger felt the material of my coat.

"Do you think you'll be married forever?" I asked after six more stops. We were somewhere very far away.

"That's generally what you do it for," he said, practically.

I sighed. Two more stops went by.

"Can we still take different modes of transportation together, never getting to any real destination?"

"We can do anything you want to do." He spread his arms back against the seats, his coat gaping open. He looked like a starfish missing a leg.

## Hopeful Loops, 5

"Frank," I said into the payphone. "My car broke down."

I watched the traffic in the street. My car sat idling at a no stopping zone.

I imagined him in a sweater, in the library of his mansion, pulling the pipe out of his mouth. "It did?" His metallic phone voice said back to me.

I faced the building, scratching the brick with my extra quarter. Drawing lines into the red. "No," I said, finally.

"...Are you okay?" He said after I said nothing else.

"..You just wanted to call me?" He echoed my thoughts.

I nodded onto the phone. Very effective.

I heard him sigh. I listened to the noise on my end, and the quiet on his end.

"What happens at your house this time of night?" I said, dawdling.

"Night? Afternoon, my dear. It's four o'clock."

"Whatever."

"Umm...well, one daughter is at dance class. The other is napping on the couch..." I instantly liked the other daughter better. "I'm not usually home, I just happened to have a physical today and didn't go back in to work afterwards."

"What'd they say at your physical?"

"They said I should stop taking public transportation."

I looked at the wall where I had etched "Frank's wife sucks" in white with the quarter. I looked at Ben Franklin on the quarter and wondered if he was mad that he was on such a low sum of money. Then I wondered if that was Ben Franklin's real hair.

"Oh."

"My wife is at work. She works at a shelter."

"I actually didn't call to talk about your wife." I said, matter-of-factly.

"Oh."

Long pause. I looked at some people passing my car. Ready to leap over and beat the shit out of them if they tried to get in or steal it.

"You don't really need my help," he said, finally, with a long sigh. The kind of sigh you have after eating a lot of warm food.

"It's not that I don't need it -- I want it."

I waited, then hung up.

### Hopeful Loops, 6

We sat by the indoor pool, the shouts of the million nine-year-old relaying swimteamers and their coaches echoing off the community center's walls. He was in a dripping bathing suit. Barefoot, on the bench. I sat next to him in my coat over a dry pink bikini. He had his elbows on his knees and we were both looking at his feet.

"I've never seen them before," I said, glancing at the dripping water between the bench slats.

"Yes," he said.

"They're so...innocent. I hope you don't speak harshly in front of them."

A pack of nubile fifteen-year-olds passed us. I felt overdressed.

"I don't speak harshly in front of anyone," he said, quietly, as if to prove his point.

My foot was twitching. Maybe it wanted to get out and meet Frank's feet.

"Well, look, we can't just keep meeting in weird places. There's no point to it."

"What point did you want?"

"I wanted a place where our points could run free. Where my feet were allowed to mingle naked with your feet. Not with this wardrobe, and your whole other life thing draped around the room like a shroud," I said.

"What makes you think you're ready for me?"

I looked at him sitting there, dripping.

"I'm kind of cold," he added, and I noticed goosebumps.

"Get back in the water."

"Are you going to get out of your coat?"

"I didn't get a locker. Besides, showing more skin is hardly going to HELP at this point in our relationship."

He stood up. "We're having a relationship?"

I gestured at his body. "You're practically NUDE in front of me."

"We're in a public place. There're kids here," he motioned around.

"It's not IDEAL. But it's happening. It's only a matter of time."

"Everyone's almost nude here."

"Well some of these people take their nudity home and share it with others who know them well," I said, exasperated.

"What do you want?"

I didn't say anything. That wasn't something one SAID.

He knelt in front of me. He put both hands on either side of my head. He kissed me, his full mouth on my scrawny one. I tried to remember how to kiss back. Then it got fun, like an otter rolling down a wet slide.

When he pulled away I wanted him to come back. I wanted to take a cab to where he had taken me. I wanted to get out and buy a little house and bake brownies and wait there until he came back. I tried to look him in the eye and pass all this information to him via mind meld, but he just knelt there, remaining separate, still separate in a whole body not mine, one that required shaving, and fatherhood.

"Can I see you again," he said, his blue eyes kind.

He placed his hand on my cheek, cementing the deal.

## Hopeful Loops, 7

We sat at the bus stop. It was freezing. I clutched my coat around me. He sat very close beside me. The weather didn't seem to bother him. He looked like he was on a fishing expedition, happily sunning himself, the Old Man and the Sea.

"It's just that I'm not like this," I said.

"What are you like."

"It's fucking freezing out here."

He put his warm hand into my pocket.

"I'm not tragic enough to be following you around, meeting on pieces of wood. I'm not black and white. You aren't Ingrid Bergman."

"You're plenty tragic."

We watched the traffic go by. I leaned on his shoulder a bit.

Quiet.

"How did it get like this. I mean, it used to be me in my life. Now if a day goes by that I don't see you, it feels wasted."

"But there are so many days that I don't see you," he said, surprised.

"I know. Do the math."

He thought hard about it, touched.

I fidgeted. "Why does it get like that? I'm fine alone, and then there's you, and then suddenly I'm NOT fine alone. There's YOU, now."

"You weren't fine alone."

"I was great."

"No one's fine alone."

"I was pretty great."

He kissed me again, and my heart fell to its knees. My heart, on a street corner, in tattered clothes, held out a little cardboard sign "Will Work For Frank." My heart, the good one, the full one. Bucketsful of Frank, its autobiography.

"Don't do that," I finally said, mouth free.

"You wanted me to," he squeezed my hand.

"That doesn't matter," I said.

## Hopeful Loops, 8

Frank looked sorry the next time I saw him, on a big red bus. The kind pretending that it was from England when really it was from someplace in Illinois. We rode on the top even though it was November and it was freezing, and the sky above us looked evil. When the bus took corners, it heaved like a fat woman with huge breasts, threatening to spill us out the top. I clutched on to Frank, his new beige trenchcoat with the soft lining on the inside. Obviously an early Christmas present. Something substantial from someone substantial.

I looped my strongest finger through a buttonhole and watched the streetlights rushing by, the trees, the blur of human faces, American with a British feel.

Frank looked French, his hair a halo of wind frenzy, his eyes grey and withdrawn, the bus a circus ride beneath us.

"This is definitely the sexy ride," I said finally, mostly to my shirt sleeve which was wiping my cold wet nose. I wanted to say "It's like riding a giant undulating French woman," but I didn't want him to know my mind worked that way.

He was staring out at the streets, at the foreigners, at our life, passing by at a hundred miles an hour.

Desperately, I took out the tattered envelope with the fractions of sentences on it.

"Your `o's," I said, yelling. "Look at your `o's," waving the paper in front of him like an excellent report card.

But he was gone. My Frank, the one I traveled with, the one who knew nothing of me and took nothing from me. The possibility of Frank, he was dwindling. I could feel it slipping away, the perception I had had, falling around me like dead flies.

The bus stopped at a light.

"We don't have to stop here!" I shrieked, but a bird flew over my head, shrieking louder. Frank looked at my shoes.

His eyes made short sputtering trips up to my belt. To my nose, like he was building blocks, but not looking at what he was building, instead composing music in his head. His eyes flickered at mine but what I saw in them was broken.

"Where are we going, Frank," I finally said to him, after three more blocks.

I watched his lips, pink. Then they turned grey as he tightened them across his teeth, and then they parted and the great whites showed through.

"I think we're getting off soon," he said.

## Hopeful Loops, 9

Frank sat on the curb with me. The curb was grey and used, like an old felt hat from the 20's. I felt dizzy, a sailor fresh from sea, unused to the stilted land.

"It's not that you're different," he said.

I looked at his hands folded thoughtfully in his lap, like a teacher.

"It's that there's too much of you," he finished. His index finger twitched with accomplishment. He had obviously been working on that statement.

I scoffed at his absurdity.

We sat there a while longer.

"Coward." I said, finally. I wanted to get up. "And not even Noel Coward. Regular Coward."

His finger twitched again. I decided never to look him in the face again. Never to look any man in the face again. Fingers were bad enough.

"I just needed a little movement. You were so good at it for awhile," I said, my voice warbly and depressing me.

He hesitated. Cleared his throat. He suddenly put his face down on his knees, and then turned it, so he was looking in my eyes.

I felt my knees turn soft like warm Thanksgiving gravy. His eyes sang to me.

After a moment, his index finger touched my calf and ran all the way up to my gravy knee. He felt the edge of my skirt.

His eyes looped around my head and pulled me in until I couldn't breathe.

"Eventually we would've run out," he said.

There was a pause, the kind long enough to enter a house, take off a raincoat, and hang it up on a strong wooden wall rack while checking your reflection in an old-fashioned mirror.

Then his fingers were gone.